

Tragic Texas drama calls for sympathy

No one should have been surprised at the fiery ending of the 51-day standoff in Waco, Texas, by religious fanatic David Koresh and his Branch Davidian followers.

It had become clear shortly after the standoff began that Koresh and company were not going to surrender. The only question was when would the assembled law enforcement agencies move in.

The next several months will see the FBI, ATF and other agencies turned inside out in an attempt to understand what went wrong, both with the initial assault that saw four ATF agents killed and with Monday's final siege.

And until all of the facts are in, judgment should be withheld. Armchair quarterbacking, always a favorite American pastime, can serve no constructive purpose.

However, if history is any indication, the blame for the entire incident will likely fall on Koresh. Koresh lied to FBI negotiators about when he would surrender, giving them supposed timetables but refusing to follow through when the time came.

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Furthermore, the FBI had reliable information that Koresh was growing more violent every day and was increasingly abusive to the children who were held captive in the group's compound.

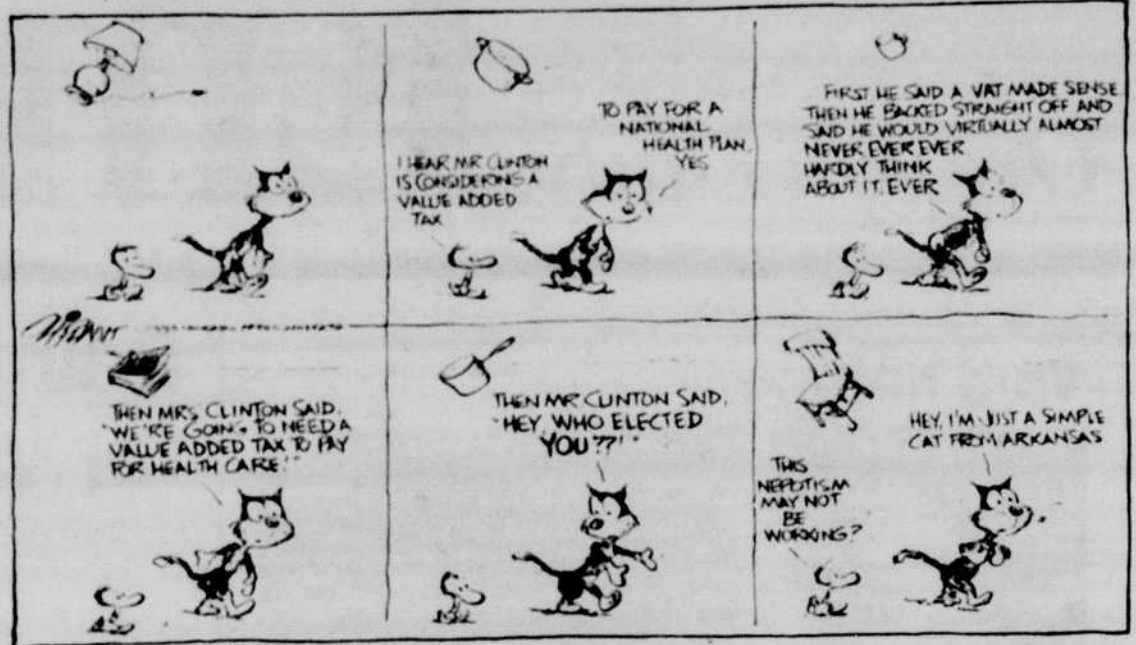
Koresh exhibited paranoia that was frighteningly reminiscent of the last days of the Rev. Jim Jones and his People's Temple. Jones, along with about 900 followers, committed suicide by drinking cyanide-laced punch after killing a California legislator who had flown to the group's South American hideaway to investigate charges of mistreatment.

However, a primary difference in the two cases is that Jones' followers apparently took their lives willingly, whereas many of Koresh's followers seem to have tried escaping shortly before the blaze.

At least nine people survived after fleeing the building. Investigators now believe others may have been shot trying to flee the burning building. Some messiah.

Most upsetting was the murder of the several children within the compound. Koresh could have taken steps to protect the children in the compound but apparently chose to sacrifice them instead. There have been reports that the children were herded into an upper floor of the compound so they would burn, and presumably die, more quickly. Other reports suggest the children may have been poisoned before the fire so they wouldn't suffer.

Whatever the final outcome of the myriad of upcoming investigations, our sympathy should remain extended to the families of the victims, of the four dead ATF agents and for those agents who spent the past two months attempting to negotiate a no-win situation.



COMMENTARY

Traditional does not mean moral

By Ron Schlittler

One thing is clear to me. Biblical authority in western culture arguing that humans are divinely authorized to subdue the earth is suicidal. Such a position is not only arrogant, it is naive.

It rejects the reality that humans are part of a vast and delicate network of all life. It supposes we have the wisdom and responsibility to decide what aspects of nature should or should not be, and how they should or should not exist. This isn't working.

The timber vs. environment problems in our part of the world illustrate only one such narrowly self-serving but long-honored tradition of short-sightedness. Now it collides with the challenge of finding a workable outlook for the future that respects our interconnection with all other life.

Western culture has systematically fought to ignore and suppress the reality that not everyone is, or even should be, heterosexual. Literature and scientific evidence that suggest homosexuality is nothing more than a natural human variation such as left-handedness are only beginning to receive fair treatment.

As with our perception of our relationship to the natural environment, collectively we are beginning to take note of a more honest perception of reality regarding human sexuality. This is reflected in the homosexual civil rights movement of our decade and the fair-minded public policy it demands.

It is a challenging and painful cultural process. Many growing processes are. They ask us to set aside fondly held but flawed perspectives. Nothing strikes at the core of our cultural self-perception quite so deeply as questions about the nature of sexual identity.

And, generally speaking, western culture has never handled matters of sex in a very healthy way. Denial, guilt, shame and power games are the stuff of coercion and authoritarian control, not happiness.

The gut-wrenching process many parents and families experience when an adolescent or adult child reveals his or her homosexuality is not unlike the

anguish experienced of a timber-dependent family that learns its way of life is about to end. The anger, the sense of loss, the need to blame, the awful feeling the world will never be the same, the search for resolution; these are universals in the process of grappling with fundamental challenges and views about life.

So why have I tried to develop this rather far-reaching analogy? Because it is my firm belief that our homosexual and bisexual mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends, neighbors and colleagues are as vital an ingredient in a healthy ecosystem of humankind as are heterosexuals.

Our stubborn resistance toward appreciating, nurturing and coexisting with our natural human diversity is our ultimate challenge. This is true when dealing with any of the value-laden issues of race, gender, age or sexual orientation.

As President Bill Clinton said at the timber conference, "The status quo is unacceptable." Whether learning to adapt to the reality of our natural environmental diversity or our natural human diversity, we must learn to respect and nurture the whole system. The option is to continue in a tragic, unnecessary battle against ourselves.

Our individual differences are not so irreconcilable. However, they are abused by those who know how to exploit differences for political and personal gain, or who try to excuse vicious behavior.

The only productive question to ask is how we will learn to make the most of who and what we are for the betterment of all. Lofty idealism perhaps, but hope does spring eternal. Most of us are beginning to learn to talk to each other.

The gay and lesbian civil rights movement exists because of a deeply rooted status quo that perceives homosexuals as somehow unnatural, and therefore unfit and illegible to partake in the American promise of pursuing life, liberty and happiness with all the benefits and respect due tax-paying, law-abiding citizens.

This status quo is unfair and unacceptable. It should be no surprise that the cry for change is sometimes strident.

Do we even fully understand what "natural" means? Is it natural to misunderstand and

destroy the diversity of our ecosystems? It makes no more sense to misunderstand and refuse to permit acknowledgment of the full texture of our human family.

Selectively applied distortions of biblical traditions parading as morality have long permeated western culture. They have always clashed with parallel traditions advocating fairness and reason. These distortions were used to try to keep the work of Galileo from upsetting a view of life and the world. They are also used to defend ways of life rooted in the exploiting of people and land.

In that grand tradition, such questionable value systems now continue to deny homosexuals the right to fully participate in their own self-determination.

They deny access to public rituals such as dating and marriage to create and celebrate relationships. There are no notices in the newspaper announcing intentions to spend lives together or celebrations of silver anniversaries for homosexuals.

Gays and lesbians are denied access to the support of family and community as they set out to form personally relevant household constructions. They are loudly chastised for promiscuity while explicitly and implicitly inhibited in the effort to build stable relationships and contribute to society.

Just as with the problems between timber interests and the environment, as we strive to find a way to preserve the best of both, the challenge of finding equitable solutions raised by acknowledging sexual diversity will be hammered out in the courts and in the form of better public policies.

As the timber industries are learning, it is time to end old justifications that ultimately serve the interests of no one and ensure mutual destruction. We are learning that the value of resources, whether human or material, is fundamentally tied to accepting and respecting the full range of their natural diversity.

We are also learning that traditional values are not all good, right, or even moral — simply by virtue of being traditional.

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Oregon Daily Emerald

P.O. BOX 3159, EUGENE, OREGON 97403

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co. Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The Emerald operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press.

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